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ABSTRACT

A survey of 379 adults was used to assess the extent to which television news credibility scores were a function of researcher operationalizations of the concept. Underlying this effort were published reports suggesting that single item measures of television news credibility were either biased or inadequate indicators of a more complex phenomenon. Operationalizations of the concept reflected variations of measures that specified the origin of news broadcast (local versus network programs), type of news item (local/national), and individual stations or networks watched. Television news was perceived as highly credible across all the measures, although significant differences existed across some of the credibility items. The data suggested that single item measures could present a fair overview of public perceptions of television news credibility, but that multiple operationalizations provided a more complete and accurate appraisal of the phenomenon. (RL)

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Television News Credibility: A Network vs. Station Analysis

(PRELIMINARY REPORT)

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Two decades ago, The Roper Organization began surveying the American public's evaluation of various mass media. Since 1961, according to Roper data, television has been America's most credible medium for news, cited twice as frequently as its nearest competitor, newspapers. Several published reports (Carter and Greenberg [1965] and Greenberg and Roloff [1974]) have questioned Roper's operationalization of news credibility and suggested alternative measures of the concept. This paper reports on an empirical examination of alternative measures of news credibility, assessing the extent to which alternatives affect the perceived credibility of television news.

Roper's credibility question is:

> If you got conflicting or different reports about the same news story from radio, television, the magazines or the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe - the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?

Carter and Greenberg questioned the "methodological purity" of that item, claiming it favored television over newspapers; television's added visual dimension seemed particularly valuable given the special case of conflicting reports across the media. Instead of measuring credibility only as the selection of one medium when confronted with conflicting reports, Carter and Greenberg also assessed credibility in the absence of comparisons and conflicting reports, that is, each medium in isolation. They did this by asking:

> We would like your opinion about the reliability of (e.g., radio) for news. If perfect reliability is 100%, what percent of the news on (e.g., radio) do you believe (from 0-100%)?

Data collected from 507 adults residing in the San Jose area provided support for their contention. Whereas respondents in their study chose television over newspapers when given conflicting reports by a nearly 2 to 1 margin, the gap between television and newspapers was considerably attenuated when each medium's news credibility was measured separately -- TV 82% reliability, radio 77%, newspapers 60%.

In their report commissioned by the American Newspaper Publishers Association, Greenberg and Roloff stated that an element of ambiguity in the Roper question further biased responses toward television. Specifically, Roper's question provided no cognitive reference point (e.g., local or national channel/network/newspaper operation) for respondents to utilize when selecting which medium's report they'd be most likely to believe. Without being told to focus either on local or national news operations, Greenberg and Roloff suspected that respondents based their evaluations on national network television news organizations and programs on one hand and local newspapers on the other. This, they said, "approaches a mangoes and zucchini comparison." While not so noted, this objection appears equally applicable to the Carter and Greenberg alternative since they too provided no reference point.

In addition to the biases discussed above, Roper's credibility question in and of itself seems limited in a number of ways. First, assessing credibility in the special case of conflicting reports provides little information about the credibility of each medium in the more general case of consistent reports (or viewer/reader unawareness of cross-media discrepancies). Second, and related to that, selection of one medium as most credible does not address what may be the more important question, "How believable are the news media?" Are the media generally credible or not credible? What is the magnitude of credibility differences across media? Roper's data cannot address these questions. Carter and Greenberg's do. Third, media news credibility may be a function not only of broadcast operation headquarters and origination (e.g., local stations, national networks) as suggested by Greenberg and Roloff but also dependent upon the type of news story covered (e.g., local, state, national, international). Given the title and thrust of their newscasts, local newscasts may be more credible when covering local events than when covering national or international events; national newscasts may be more credible in their coverage of global events than when covering state and local news. Finally, news credibility may be dependent on the particular

station or network watched (or thought of when answering the question); a station or network's format and personalities may enhance or have a deleterious effect on news credibility evaluations.

In an attempt to determine the legitimacy of the objections and potential limitations raised, this researcher developed multiple operationalizations of television credibility. These were assessed in a survey addressing respondent "opinions about television news programs." Operationalizations were variants of the Roper and Carter and Greenberg questions, specifying origination of broadcast (local station or national network), type of news item (local, state, national, international, weather and sports) and individual station or network watched (e.g., ABC, CBS or NBC's early evening national newscast).

In order to test television news credibility on the local station level, the following questions were used:

> (For those watching early evening local newscasts at least once a week and indicating a specific station usually watched for that newscast)
>
> We'd like your opinion about the believability of (local station usually watched by the respondent for the early evening local news) for news. If perfect believability equals 100%, in your opinion, what percent of the news about the Buffalo area on ___ do you believe?
>
> What percent of the news about New York State on ___ do you believe?
>
> What percent of the sports news on ___ do you believe?
>
> What percent of the weather forecast on ___ do you believe?

Use of the local station usually watched by the respondent was seen as potentially inflating believability responses to these questions. (Carter and Greenberg found credibility ratings positively related with media use and dependency.) In order to determine whether responses were so biased, respondents were asked to acsess the believability of the other local stations. The following question was used:

> Even though you may not watch them often, you probably have an opinion about how believable the other 6 o'clock local newscasts are. What percent of the news about the Buffalo area on (stations not usually watched by the respondent for the early evening local newscast) would you believe?

Television news credibility for the national, network newscasts was assessed in a similar fashion:

> (For those watching the early evening network national newscasts at least once a week and indicating a specific network usually watched for that newscast)
>
> What percent of the international news on (network early evening national newscast usually watched by the respondent) do you believe?
>
> What percent of the national news on ___ do you believe?
>
> What percent of the news about a particular state, like New York, on ___ do you believe?
>
> You probably have an opinion about how believable the other network newscasts are. What percent of the national news on (networks not usually watched by the respondent for the early evening network national newscasts) would you believe?

The multidimensional nature of credibility has been demonstrated with general (e.g., Hovland, Janis, and Kelly [1953], Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz [1966]) as well as media specific references (e.g., Tannenbaum [1956], Tannenbaum and McLeod [1963], Markham [1968], Jacobson [1969], and Edelson [1973]). Despite this, Carter and Greenberg used the terms "reliability" and :"believe" interchangeably in their survey question, suggesting that credibility was to them either a unidimensional concept captured by those terms or that those terms applied to a variety of credibility dimensions. In order to examine the extent to which news credibility scores were a function of the term used and/or dimension assessed, one additional question representing each of two specific credibility dimensions (competence and dynamism) was included for both the local and national news programs. These questions, following belief in the weather forecast for the local stations and belief in news about a particular state for the national networks were:

> If perfect competence equals 100%, how competent are the newscasters and reporters on ___?
>
> If a totally powerful style of presenting the news equals 100%, how powerful is the presentation style on ___?

Roper's question compared radio, television, the magazines and the newspapers. A clearcut majority of those sampled during each of Roper's eleven surveys during

the past 20 years cited television or newspapers as most believable. In 1978, seven of ten interviewed selected either television or newspapers (47% TV, 23% newspapers) as the media they'd be most inclined to believe given conflicting reports; only 18% selected radio or magazines. Given these figures, and data indicating most Americans rely on television or newspapers for news, only two media were available as choices in the Roper question variants utilized in this survey. Those variants were:

> If you got conflicting or different reports about the same news story from television or the newspapers, which of the two versions would you be more inclined to believe?
>
> If you got conflicting or different reports about the same national news story on (network usually watched by the respondent for early evening national newscasts)'s national newscast and (a Buffalo paper usually read by the respondent), which of the two versions of the story would you be more inclined to believe?
>
> If you got conflicting or different reports about the same national news story on (local station usually watched by the respondent for the early evening local news)'s local newscast and (a Buffalo paper usually read by the respondent), which of the two versions of the story would you be more inclined to believe?
>
> If you got conflicting or different reports about the same local news story on (local station usually watched by the respondent for the early evening local news)'s local newscast and (a Buffalo paper usually read by the respondent), which of the two versions of the story would you be more inclined to believe?

Respondents were 379 adults residing in the Buffalo, New York, area. (Table 1 provides a demographic analysis of the sample.) Their phone numbers were selected from the area's current telephone directory using a systematic random sampling procedure. Interviews were conducted on weekday evenings between March 27 and April 3 , 1979. Interviewers were students enrolled in the author's television news class; all were trained for the specifics of this interviewing task.

RESULTS

Believability Measures: Respondents in Carter and Greenberg's study said they believed 82% of the news they saw on television. Given the question asked, one can only speculate as to the type of news item and newscast respondents considered in answering the question. In this survey respondents were asked to rate the believability of specific news item types aired in local station and national network newscasts.

Belief scores varied considerably ($F=38.8$, $p<.01$) across items aired on local station newscasts. Sports items were most often believed, the weather forecast least often believed. Whereas 86.0% of the sports items presented were believed, the belief score for the weather forecast was 71.1%. Sandwiched between these extremes were belief scores for the "news" news items. Respondents were more likely to believe more of the local (Buffalo) news stories than (New York) state stories (80.8% to 75.7%, $t=5.94$, $p<.01$). Believability scores across the international, national and state items presented on the network newscasts were virtually identical. For each news item type, three of four of the news stories presented were believed. (Belief scores were 75.6% for international news, 74.9% for national news, and 75.2% for state news.)

Excluding sports and weather, respondents appeared to regard network and local station news reports as equally believable. On the local station level, the average believability score was 77.2%; on the national network level, the average believability score was 76.4%. These scores are slightly lower than those reported by Carter and Greenberg. Network and station newscasters and reporters were accorded equal competence; on the local level, station newscasters and reporters received a competence rating of 83.2%; on the national level, the corresponding figure was 84.5%. Perceived powerfulness of presentation style was a function of station or network reference point; local station newscasts averaged 80.2%, the network newscasts 84.2% ($t=3.46$, $p<.01$). (See Table 2 for responses to the

believability measures.)

Responses to the believability measures were not a function of the particular station or network watched and used as a reference point for these questions. On the local level, each station was equally believed across all the news item, competence add presentation style measures. The same was true when analyzing responses across networks. Viewers placed equal trust in the newscasts they watched. On the other hand, viewers were more likely to rate their news station or network as more credible than the stations and networks they didn't use for news.

Excluding sports and weather, the striking similarity of responses across news items, stations, networks, and station-network comparisons suggests TV news credibility to be strongly dependent on the credibility rating assigned to television in general. If this is the case, two related questions emerge. First, to what extent do attitudes about television in general color attitudes about TV newscasts? Second, do attitudes about television in general inflate or deflate TV news credibility ratings? Both seem worthy of investigation.

Conflicting Report Measures: Given conflicting reports of the same news story across the media, 47% of Roper's 1978 national sample said they'd be most inclined to believe television, 23% newspapers. (Radio and magazines each were selected by 9% of Roper's respondents; 12% either didn't know or couldn't answer the question.) In this sample, responses varied considerably on the basis of the news item and newscast frame of reference provided in the conflicting reports questions. When no frame of reference was provided (akin to the Roper question), only slightly more chose television: 39.4% selected television, 35.9% newspapers. (See Table 3 for responses to the conflicting reports questions.) When asked to choose between the network version of a national news story and the local paper's version, reppondents chose the television account by a two to one margin (50.6% to 25.4%). These figures are quite similar to Roper data. When asked to choose between the local station's version of a national news item and the local paper's

account, the margin of difference between selection of television and newspapers was considerably diminished; here, 44.8% said television, 32.3% newspapers. Finally, when confronted with conflicting reports about a local news story presented on the local television stations and the local newspapers, television's selection margin over newspapers was narrowed to 10%; 42.9% said television, 32.7% said newspapers. (For each of the four variants of Roper's conflicting reports question, one-fourth of this sample was unable or unwilling to select either television or newspapers. Some said both versions, some said neither version. Others said it varies, still others had no idea.)

Television's margin of selection appears to be a function of the reference provided. Television fares best when the reference is the national network newscast. Newspaper credibility is highest when compared with local television station reports of local news items. At least for this sample, providing no news item or newscast frame of reference favored newspapers. Greenberg and Roloff suggested that when given no frame of reference, people think of network television for the television version of the news report and their local newspaper for the newspaper version. Perhaps when given no frame of reference, people think of local television newscasts, newspapers, and news items. Since newspapers are cited most frequently as the medium relied on most for news about the local area (e.g., Stempel [1973]), such a set of cognitions would favor newspapers. Roper's credibility question, then, may in fact have a pro-newspaper bias.

Impact of News Media Usage Patterns: Carter and Greenberg reported a direct usage-credibility relationship using both their believability measure and Roper's conflicting reports item with a question assessing medium most used for news about the world. In this survey, items assessed both frequency of exposure to the early evening local and national newscasts as well as reliance on television or newspapers for the day's world, national, state and local news events. For these analyses, news media usage patterns were collapsed into dichotomous

variables (infrequent [twice a week or less] and frequent [at least three times a week] viewers of the local and national newscasts). The reliance measures also were dichotomous; only the TV or newspaper responses to the "where do you get more of your news about the world, nation, state and local area" questions were utilized.

Frequency of exposure to the national and local newscasts was related to two of the believability items. Those watching the national news at least three times a week believed more of the international and state stories than those watching network newscasts twice a week or less. Believability scores for the low and high frequency of exposure groups were 71% and 78.4% for the international news items ($F=7.2$, $p<.01$) and 70.5% and 78.3% for the state items ($F=3.8$, $p<.01$). Media reliance patterns were related to three media believability items. Those who relied on TV for news about the world believed more of the international (77.8% to 71.5%, $F=3.8$, $p<.05$) and national (77.7% to 70.6%, $F=7.0$, $p<.01$) news items than those relying on newspapers for those stories. Those relying on TV for local news expressed more belief in local news stories aired on the local newscasts than those relying on newspapers for local news (84.2% to 79.4%, $F=4.1$, $p<.01$).

Frequency of exposure to the local newscasts was related to media selection when confronted with conflicting reports about the same national and local news items. Most of those frequently exposed to local newscasts selected the TV version; a smaller majority of those with limited exposure to local newscasts chose newspapers. For example, when given conflicting reports about a national news story aired on a local newscast and printed in a local paper, 63.9% of the heavy local TV news viewers selected the TV version; 54.3% of the less exposed group chose the newspaper version. Media reliance patterns also were related to selection of news medium when confronted with conflicting reports. Those relying on television for news about the world, nation, state and local area were far more likely to choose the TV version for all news stories on all newscasts.

Those relying on newspapers were more likely to choose the newspaper version, although not always as disproportionately so.

In short, as noted in earlier reports, there appears to be a direct news media usage-credibility relationship. The extent of this relationship however varies with the specifics of the usage and credibility measures utilized.

Impact of Respondent Demographic Attributes: Differences in responses based on respondent sex, age, level of education and family income were assessed. Here, demographic attributes were analyzed as dichotomous variables. (Age: younger than 40, at least 40; level of education: through high school, at least some college; family income: less than $15,000, at least $15,000.)

Men were more likely to rely on newspapers for news about the Buffalo area, New York State, the nation and the world. Those over 40 viewed the early evening local and national newscasts more frequently than their younger counterparts. They were also more likely to rely on television as their primary source of national news. Those with at least some college education more frequently turned to newspapers for news about New York State, the nation and the world. Respondents with family incomes under $15,000 more frequently watched the network newscasts than those with more substantial family incomes. Despite these differences, responses to the credibility items were remarkably similar across the subsamples studied. There were no differences in any of the credibility items attributable to respondent sex or family income level. Age was related to belief in sports news and weather forecasts presented on the local stations; those over 40 were less likely to believe the sports reports and more likely to believe the weather forecasts. Those with at least some college education regarded the weather forecasts as less believable than their less formally educated counterparts. The college educated also regarded the local newscasters and reporters as less competent. Finally, they were more likely to select newspapers over television for conflicting reports (when no frame of reference was provided).

In short, there was little variance in responses to the credibility items

across major demographic subgroups in this sample. This is somewhat at odds with previous studies (e.g., Westley and Severin [1964] Carter and Greenberg [1965]) which suggested varying functional relationships among respondent demographic attributes and perceptions of media news credibility. This may be the result of (a) the sample of respondents studied, (b) differences in operationalizations of credibility across studies, and/or (c) shifts among subgroups in their perceptions of media credibility over the past decade and a half.

CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to assess the extent to which television news credibility scores were a function of researcher operationalizations of the concept. Underlying this effort were published reports suggesting that single item measures of TV news credibilty either were biased or inadequate indicators of a more complex phenomenon. Operationalizations of the concept in this study were variations of the measures used by Roper and Carter and Greenberg, specifying origination of news broadcast, type of news item, and individual station or network watched. Television news was perceived of as highly credible across all the measures utilized, although significant differences did exist across some of the credibility items. These data suggest that single item measures such as Roper's can present a fair overview of public perceptions of television news credibility. At the same time, they indicate that multiple operationalizations are needed for a more complete and accurate appraisal of the phenomenon.

TABLE 1

DEMOGRAPHIC ATTRIBUTES OF THE SAMPLE

Sex:	Male	43.1%
	Female	56.9%
Age:	18-29	33.9%
	30-39	21.0%
	40-49	13.2%
	50-59	15.5%
	over 60	16.2%
Education:	Less than 8th grade	2.2%
	Some high school	12.7%
	High school degree	37.2%
	Some college	26.1%
	College degree(s)	21.8%
Family Income:	Less than $10,000	19.7%
	$10-15,000	20.0%
	$15-20,000	25.6%
	Over $20,000	34.7%
Race	White	94.5%
	Non-white	5.5%

TABLE 2
TELEVISION NEWS CREDIBILITY: PERCENT OF NEWS ITEMS BELIEVED

	Belief Scores			
	Local Newscast Watched			
Belief Item	Channel 2	Channel 4	Channel 7	$\bar{X}$
Local (Buffalo) News	81.2%	81.1%	80.5%	80.8%
(New York) State News	74.9%	77.9%	75.1%	75.7%
Sports	86.0%	87.8%	86.8%	86.8%
Weather	70.4%	73.8%	70.1%	71.1%
Newscaster competence	81.8%	84.5%	84.3%	83.6%
Presentation Style	77.9%	81.3%	83.5%	81.4%
	National Newscast Watched			
	NBC	CBS	ABC	$\bar{X}$
International News	77.4%	78.1%	72.3%	75.6%
National News	78.7%	76.5%	71.5%	74.9%
State News	77.1%	74.1%	75.3%	75.2%
Newscaster competence	85.0%	83.5%	83.0%	83.6%
Presentation Style	83.8%	85.0%	82.8%	83.9%

TABLE 3

TELEVISION NEWS CREDIBILITY: CONFLICTING REPORTS

News Item Referent	Television	Local Newspaper	Both	Neither	Varies	DK
No referent provided ("same news story")	39.4%	35.9%	4.3%	6.2%	6.7%	7.5%
	TV National Newscast					
National news story	50.6%	25.4%	4.1%	4.9%	7.3%	7.8%
	TV Local Newscast					
National news story	44.8%	32.3%	3.8%	6.2%	7.3%	5.4%
Local news story	42.9%	32.7%	3.3%	5.7%	8.7%	6.8%

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